Why Blended Learning Is the Fastest Way to Close Digital Skill Gaps

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With digital transformation sweeping through enterprises today, it's never been more crucial for organizations to close skill gaps in emerging technologies. Hiring isn't always the answer. The extreme shortage of candidates for roles in Artificial Intelligence (AI), Machine Learning, Data Science and other disciplines is one reason why training from within—and upskilling your existing employees—makes the smartest, fastest and most cost-effective solution.

The true costs of single-method employee training

Not all corporate training methodologies are created equal, so depending on just one has its drawbacks. Off-site classroom training, long the mainstay of employee Learning and Development (L&D) programs, can be expensive and disruptive to daily operations. As Training Magazine says, "The most obvious advantage to staying on-site is avoiding expenses such as transportation, lodging, meeting room rental, and, to some degree, food and beverage, not to mention the resources spent on site-searching, and this cost saving becomes more significant as training needs increase."[1]

While less of an interruption than sending staff off-site, instructor-led training at the workplace still causes employees to lose more time away from their daily tasks. By comparison, online training videos are economical and low-impact. "eLearning takes up to 40-60% less time than classroom instruction," according to eLearning Industry.[15]

However, eLearning alone has its own challenges. Learner engagement and completion rates for many massive open online courses (MOOCs) are dismal, often as low as 5.5 percent.[2] That's evidence that simply curating content from various sources and providing this content through online learning libraries is not enough to reliably impart useful skills. Something else is needed.

"Take for example all the free knowledge that's available in all the books in all the libraries in all the world, and yet that alone has not created an army of PhDs walking the Earth," says Simplilearn founder, Krishna Kumar. "For most people, to truly learn a skill requires mentorship, assistance and human interaction, not just raw information."

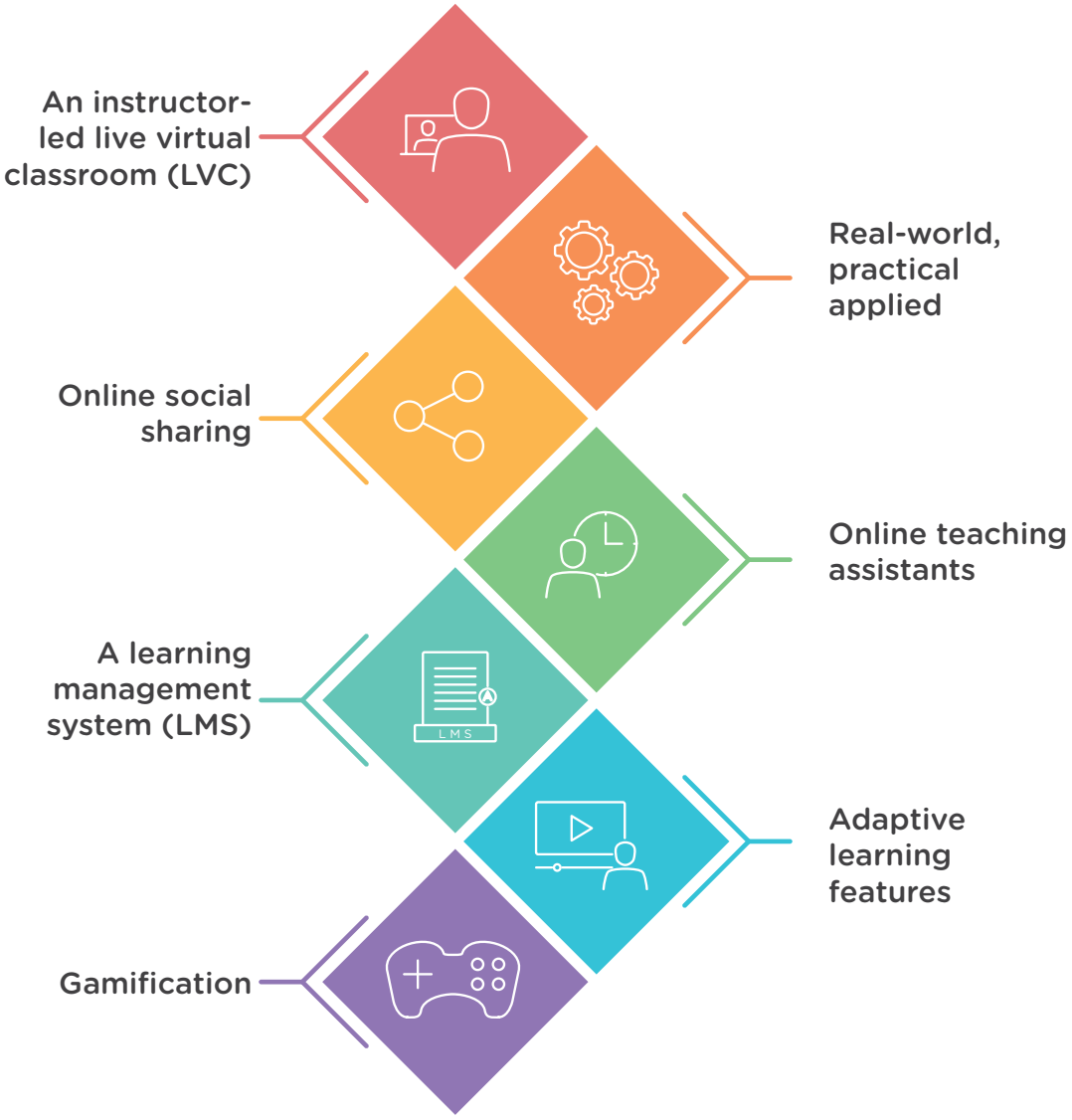
What works best is **a flexible combination of live instruction, online learning and practical projects**, especially when mingled with other elements that reinforce the training through social sharing and management insight. This delivery method is called **blended learning**.

eLearning takes up to 40-60% less time than classroom instruction.

- eLearning Industry

What does blended learning mean?

At its most basic, blended learning complements live, instructor-led classroom training with online content, usually in the form of on-demand videos that learners review outside of class. This scenario is already common in K-12 schools and higher academia. Businesses, on the other hand, require a more dynamic application of blended learning, with additional options available. **Beyond on-premises and online content**, these other important elements can include:



Clifford Maxwell, a learning researcher at the Christensen Institute, says that blended learning represents "a fundamental shift in instruction that has the potential to optimize for the individual student in ways that traditional instruction never could."[3]

Extensively studied and practiced in K-12 education, blended learning also offers an ideal solution for improving corporate training, especially when it comes to upskilling employees for the quickly-evolving digital economy. Here are five reasons why:

1. Different people learn different things in different ways

Every L&D professional, and practically every parent of a school-age child, has heard that different people learn differently. In 1992, researchers Fleming and Mills developed a popular model of learning styles called VARK.[4] The VARK modalities theory stands for **Visual** (when people learn best by sight), **Aural** or Auditory (when people learn by hearing or speaking), **Read**/Written (when people learn when things are displayed as words) and **Kinesthetic** (when people learn by physical use or practice).

Source: Research by Fleming and Mills

Other researchers have broken these modalities into even more distinct learning styles, adding **Logical** (when people prefer using logic or reasoning to understand concepts), **Social** (when people learn through interaction with other people) and **Solitary** (when people learn best alone through self-study).[5]

With so many different learning styles to address, a blended learning solution already makes sense. For people who learn visually or through reading and ideally alone, **online self-paced video** delivery would prove the best mode. Social and aural learners would gain most from **live instructor-led classrooms**. Meanwhile, hands-on practice from engaging in **applied learning projects** would satisfy kinesthetic and logical learners.

However, the answer is not clear cut. Many researchers contend that the whole concept of "learning styles" is actually a myth. Christian Jarrett, Wired Magazine's Neuroscience editor, pointed out that a surprising few studies have actually supported the existence of "learning styles", and in fact, many run counter to the theory.[6]

"Even if we accept a particular scheme for measuring learning styles, evidence shows that learning style questionnaires are

unreliable," said Jarrett. "A person might think they learn better, say, visually rather than verbally, but their performance says otherwise!" Despite their uniqueness, Jarrett says most studies suggest that **the most effective way for people to learn is based on the nature of the material being taught**, not on the preferences of the individual.[6]

Even if the learning styles theory falls into doubt, **blended learning still makes good sense**, especially from a digital economy business perspective. First, the time and costs involved in conducting surveys to determine the preferred medium (videos, books, classroom, or remote instruction) adds another burden to companies trying to achieve outcomes under budget.

Especially when it comes to technology skills, there are many elements that can be taught effectively through one particular mode. For example, while some digital marketing concepts such as email, display advertising and analytics are best shared through words, graphs and visual examples, gaining practical skills in something like machine learning or DevOps requires hands-on kinesthetic experience. You can't teach Python just using pictorials.

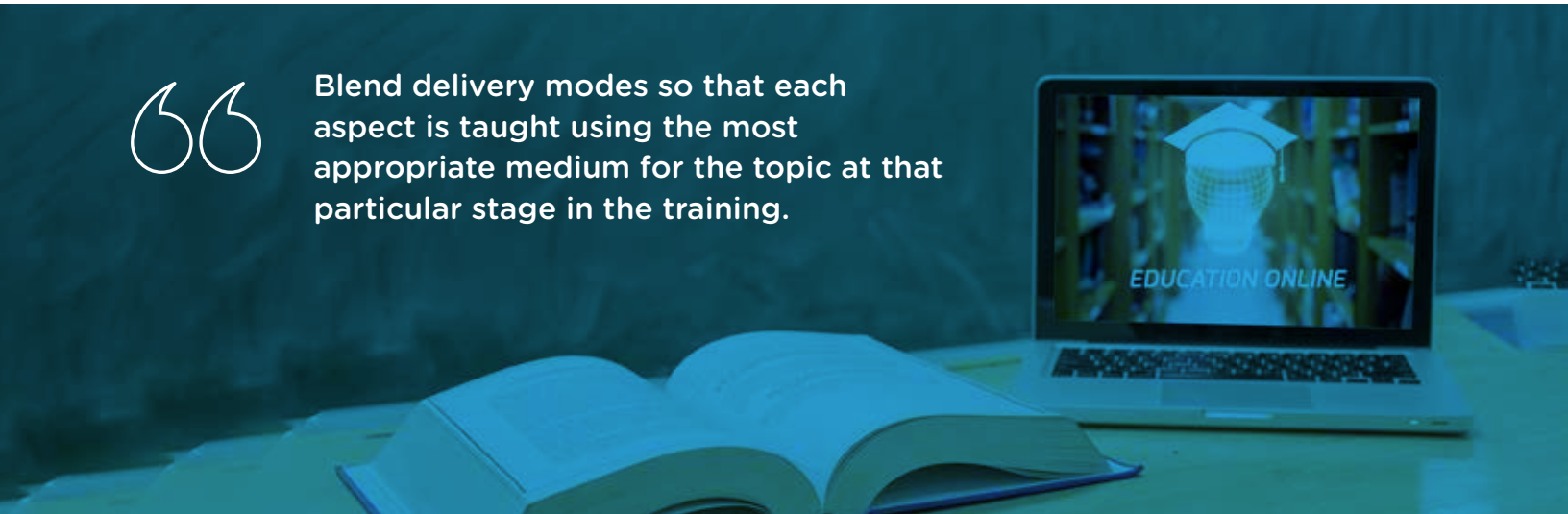
The best solution lies in blending those delivery modes so that each aspect is taught using the most appropriate medium for the topic at that particular stage in the training.

2. Multiple delivery modes improve learning

The obvious beauty of blended learning is that it's not a "one-way or no-way" process. An even bigger advantage is that **using multiple modalities, even simultaneously, dramatically reinforces engagement, learning and retention**.

Numerous studies show how learning is improved (for most people) by combining different activities alongside more passive study.[7] By utilizing as many learning delivery methods as possible (video, live instructor, social and practical), you can fill-in any knowledge gaps left by modes that were less than optimal for the specific topic or learner.

"eLearning's combination of multimedia and instructional design delivers a very rich learning experience that is, most importantly, repeatable," says online learning expert Mark Rose. "eLearning



Blend delivery modes so that each aspect is taught using the most appropriate medium for the topic at that particular stage in the training.

allows you a greater guarantee for a standardized process and consistency in the delivery of content; in short, everyone can be on the same page with what they are learning."[7]

Referring to a meta-analysis of research into simultaneous and even redundant methods of conveying learning content,[12] Bruce Gabrielle, an author and keynote speaker on verbal and multimedia learning says, "We find that **redundancy improves learning or has no effect; it never harms learning**."

"[The addition of] computer-based multimedia appears to help people learn more information in less time than traditional classroom lectures," said Georgia Institute of Technology researcher, Lawrence Najjar.[9] According to his research, information presented via redundant instructor and multimedia content appears to be most effective when:

- It encourages people to encode (write or use) the information twice.
- The delivery methods clearly support one another.
- They help learners build cognitive models of the systems they are learning.
- The dual media are presented to learners with low prior knowledge or aptitude in the topic (such as with introductory but not expert-level courses).

The advantage found in providing learners with multiple modes of instruction supports previous studies in the 1980s by the nonprofit Center for Creative Leadership. They created the popular **70:20:10 Model** for Learning and Development.[10] According to their findings:

- 70 percent of beneficial learning comes from hands-on experience and projects.
- 20 percent comes from learning from others through social experiences like coaching, mentoring and collaborative assignments.
- 10 percent of effective learning comes from traditional course-based instruction.

The 70:20:10 Model for Learning and Development.

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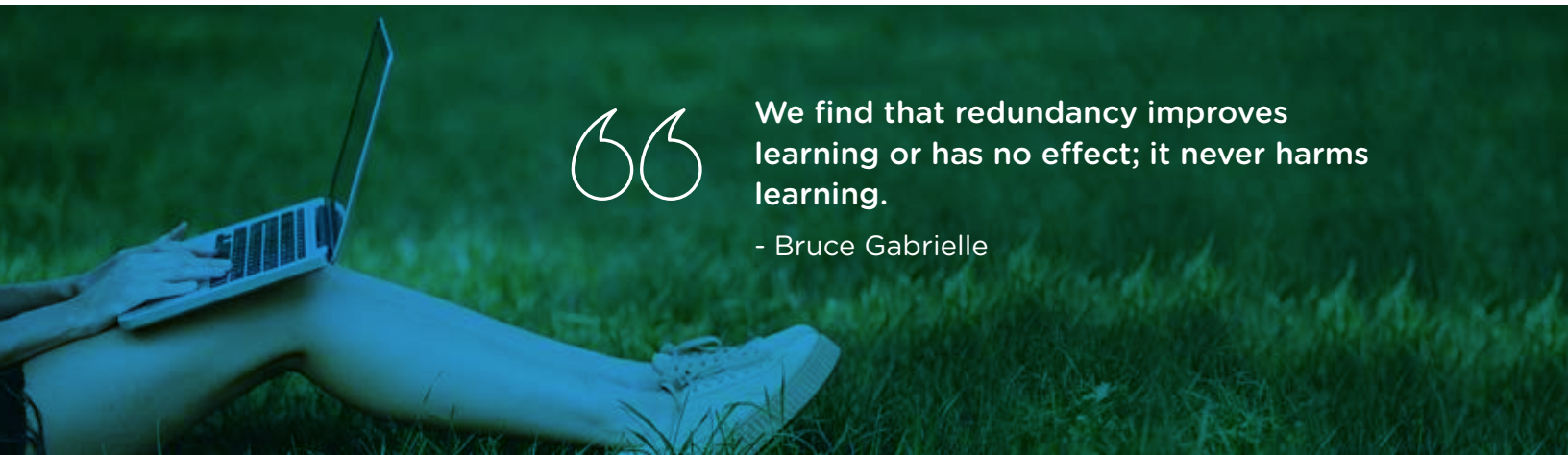
Source: Center for Creative Leadership

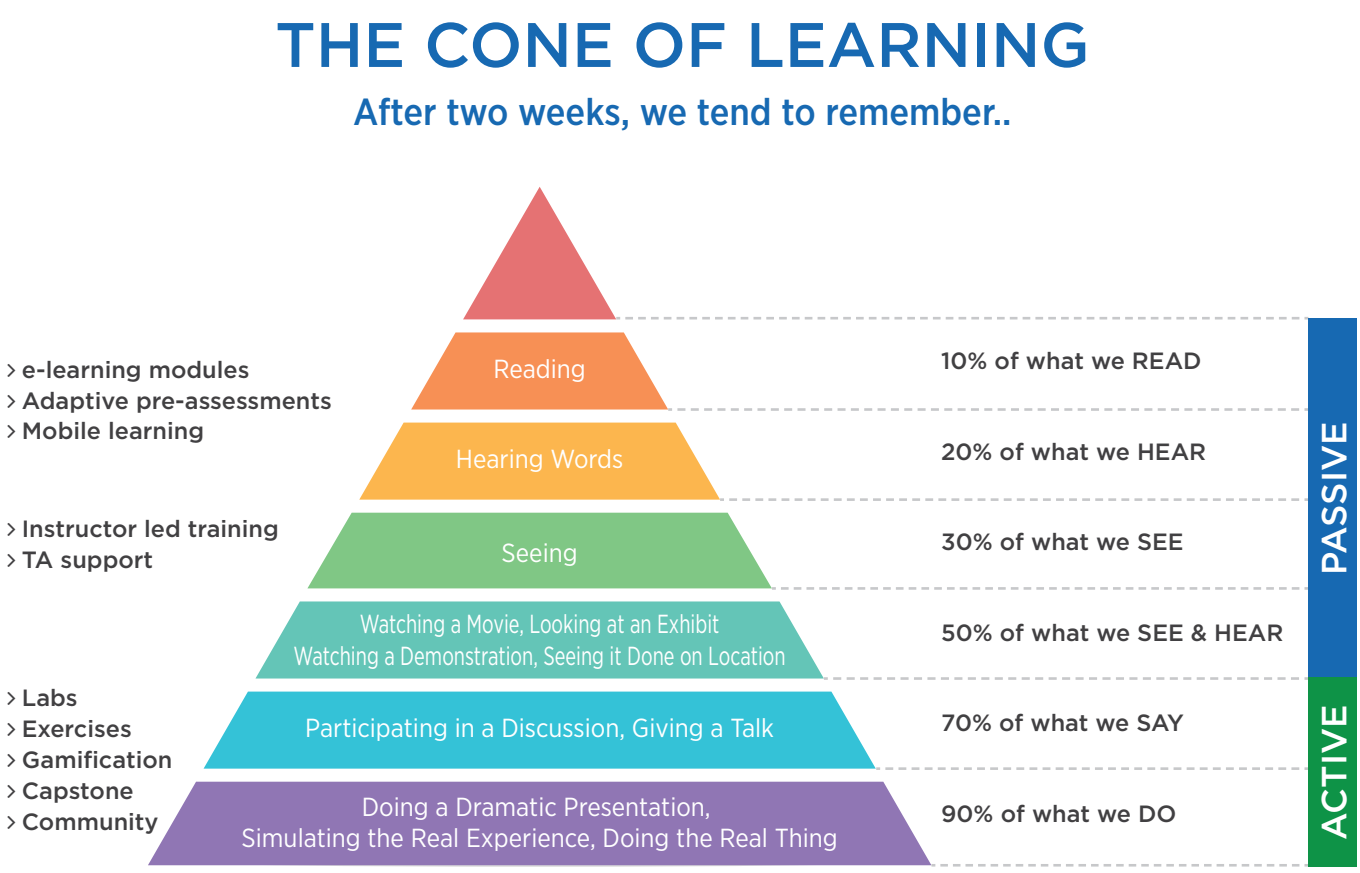


We find that redundancy improves learning or has no effect; it never harms learning.

- Bruce Gabrielle

While some experts warn that the pre-Internet 70:20:10 model does not reflect the current business prevalence of elearning,[11] the model does help explain why blended learning improves employee training.

Another popular theory that supports the advantage of blended learning is Dr. Edgar Dale's ***Cone of Learning.*** Depicting eleven stages, starting from concrete experiences at the base then becoming more abstract towards the peak, this model depicts how we tend to remember more depending on our personal level of involvement.



According to this principle, retention improves with the more senses that are involved in the learning process. One level is not necessarily better than the others. Instead, the experiences are interrelated and should be mixed. This achieves a balance between concrete and abstract experiences that caters to the needs of each learner.[19]

As Mark Rose explains, "When possible, **you should always strive to create learning that engages a variety of these styles**. Not only will it be helpful for the learner, but it also will go a long way in learning retention."[7]

Blended learning enables video and instructor-led content modes to reinforce each other. Denise Pirrotti Hummel, CEO of Universal Consensus, a cross-cultural management consulting and training firm, says **the best training solution supports hybrid interaction.** "The program should provide the "human" element of interaction, such as threaded discussions, video conferencing, internal corporate social media forums, or planned break-out sessions to confirm the usefulness of the knowledge and the effective application to the workplace." She continues, "This way, continuous optimization of the content and the delivery mechanism can be established."[18]

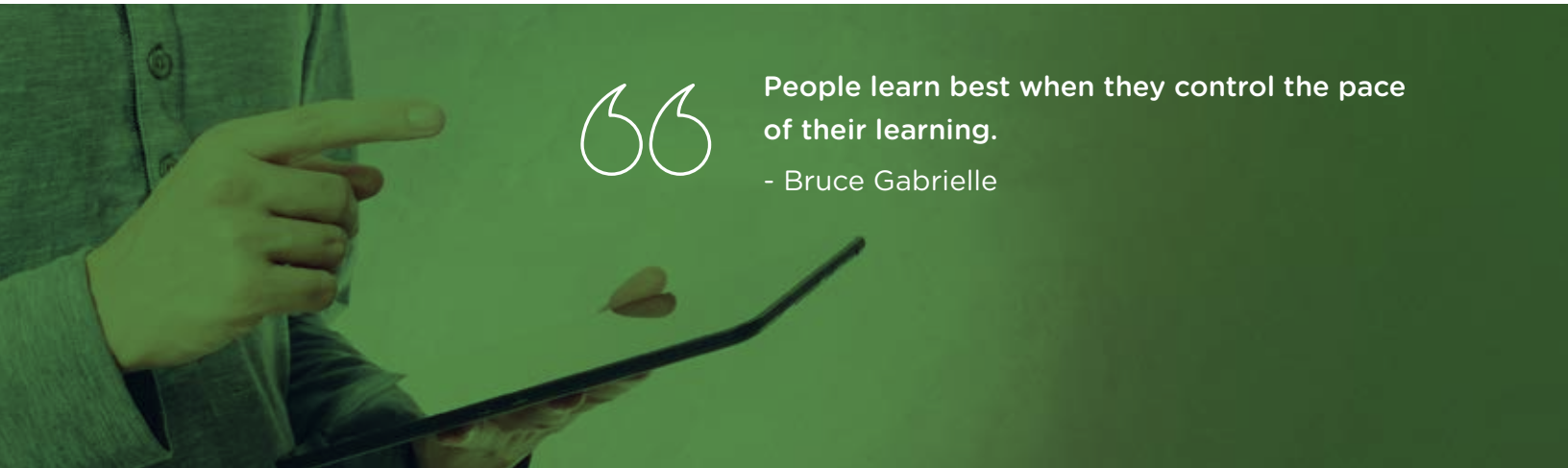
3. People learn better when they have some control over their learning

Beyond that, blending learning allows learners to supplement those lessons through additional resources as they feel it's need. As Clifford Maxwell explains, "**Blended learning is an instructional delivery model that gives students some element of control over their learning**."[3]

Corporate learners differ from traditional students. Most employees deal with time constraints, as they have to balance heavy workloads and their personal lives. Also, their coworkers come to the table with a wide range in knowledge and experience levels with the course topic.

"**People learn best when they control the pace of their learning**," says Bruce Gabrielle.[11] Blended learning enables employees to study online, as quickly as they can manage, instead of having the pace set by the fastest or slowest learner in the group. They can skip ahead past familiar information or pause, rewatch and seek additional resources. They can also access the content when they are most alert and even take breaks as necessary.

This "flipped" blended approach enables learners to start with the knowledge they gained on their own and then supplement it with the personal attention of instructor-led classroom training (either virtual or on-premises), plus the group interaction of social learning and finally, the hands-on practice of applied learning projects.



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4. Blended learning creates optimal ROI

Even well into the new millennium, many enterprises have focused on face-to-face instruction, either at the corporate or at the training provider's location. Even without eliminating classroom-style employee training, organizations of any size can optimize ROI by saving costs while increasing engagement and retention by integrating elearning into instructor-led programs.

Blended learning reduces instructor fees, company travel expenses and training materials, enables distance learning at a global scale and can greatly soften the impact training has on daily operations and the employees themselves.

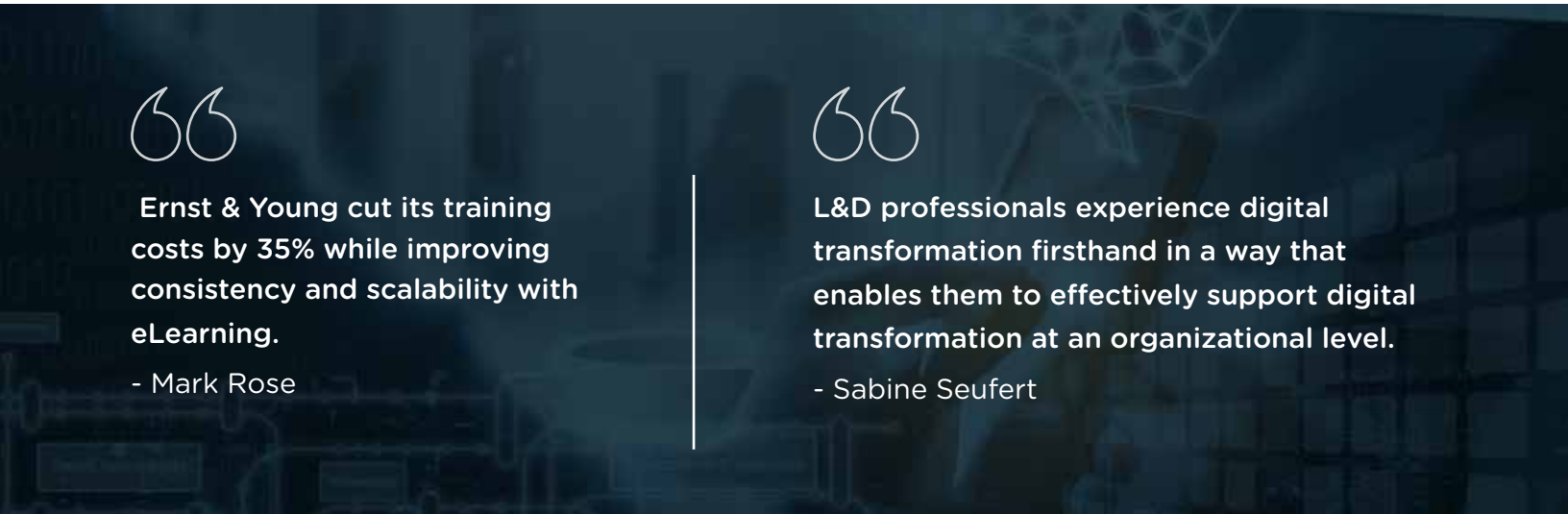
"**Ernst & Young cut its training costs by 35% while improving consistency and scalability with eLearning,"** cites Mark Rose. "They condensed about 2,900 hours of classroom training into 700 hours of web-based learning, 200 hours of distance learning and 500 hours of classroom instruction, a cut of 53%."[7]

5. The optimum learning environment for digital competence

With its online capabilities, blended learning enables the transfer of knowledge and skills essential to employees in the digital economy. eLearning platforms provide seamless integration to online practice environments for simulations and software development, and facilitate learning through social media and other virtual team interactions. In these ways, blended learning primes enterprises not just for training, but for transformation.

Thanks to the IT, Cloud Computing, Web 2.0 and other online technologies they use in their daily operations, "L&D professionals experience digital transformation firsthand in a way that enables them to effectively support digital transformation at an organizational level," says Sabine Seufert, Professor for Business Education and Educational Management at the University of St. Gallen.[13]

Seufert says L&D managers must provide learning opportunities that both develop employees' digital competences and also align with those digitally-minded employees' expectations. To accomplish



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this, she recommends, "L&D has to engage in innovation and change relating to new service formats (e.g. social learning) and altered processes (e.g. increasing use of digital resources in the process of learning."[13])

6. Effortlessly scalable, from sole employees to whole companies

Another advantage that blended learning brings, especially for large, global enterprises, is its modular and scalable nature, both upward and downward.

Dedicated classroom training takes a lot of time to set up and participate in, making it not economical on an ad hoc basis. However, online learning libraries lack the engagement, practical exercise and personal feedback that optimize learning. In contrast, by providing easily-accessible training content backed by opportunities for live virtual-instructor interaction and applied projects, **a blended learning program enables employees to upskill quickly in a specific technology or subject matter**.

As eLearning designer Troy Foster says, "Modular courses increase agility and thereby the organization's capacity to capitalize on new business opportunities as they arise."[16]

By complementing anytime online content with localized instructors, blended learning enables both scalability and the cultural personalization required to achieve training globally. Boeing, the world's largest aerospace company with 330,000 employees in 28 countries, successfully uses a mix of learning and development methodologies, from online modules, to "lunch-and-learns," to one-on-one training, to live virtual classrooms.[17]

Blending-in means never having to stand alone

In conclusion, the final advantage of blended learning is that you don't have to invent anything or depend on ad hoc fixes to increase the effectiveness of your employee training program. Proven solutions are already available from third-party vendors, like Simplilearn, who can supply and guide you in the best customized blended learning solution for digital upskilling.

Jane Hart, author, consultant and Editor of Modern Workplace Learning Magazine says, "For real transformation to take place, it's not a matter of having a 'bolt-on' strategy to existing training practices ('typically social and mobile'), but rather 'a full-on, meaningful reconception' of what it means to support all ways of learning in the modern digital workplace."[14]

> **Modular courses increase agility and thereby the organization's capacity to capitalize on new business opportunities as they arise.**
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> - Troy Foster

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Simplilearn's 400+ training courses are designed and updated by world-class industry experts. Their blended learning approach combines e-learning classes, instructor-led live virtual classrooms, applied learning projects, and 24/7 teaching assistance. More than 40 global training organizations have recognized Simplilearn as an official provider of certification training. The company has been named the 8th most influential education brand in the world by LinkedIn.

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